

Silent Struggles: Exploring Mental Health and Suicidal Ideation Among JEE/NEET Aspirants

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India's NEET and JEE entrance exams are among the most competitive globally, with millions of students vying for limited seats in prestigious medical and engineering institutions. This study examines the association between Perceived Social Support and Suicidal Ideation among students preparing for these exams, with Psychological Well-Being as a mediator. The data was collected from 397 students aged 15-19 in Mumbai, through purposive sampling and a correlational design was used. Standardized measures assessed perceived social support, psychological well-being, and suicidal ideation. Results showed the negative correlation between perceived social support and suicidal ideation to be significant. Through mediation analysis, it was reported that psychological well-being fully mediated this relationship, underscoring the critical role of well-being in buffering students from academic stress. These findings emphasize the importance of family encouragement and interventions that support psychological well-being to reduce the alarming rates of student suicides among JEE and NEET aspirants.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, perceived social support, suicidal ideation

Among the hardest and most competitive entrance exams in the world are the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test-medical entrance exam) and JEE (Joint Entrance Examination- engineering entrance exam) in India. Every year, millions of students nationwide prepare for these exams, hoping to secure a seat in one of India's top medical or engineering colleges. There is fierce competition for these few spots, and immense pressure exists to succeed. The intense pressure placed on students to perform well on the NEET and JEE exams can have a detrimental impact on their mental and physical well-being. There are several sources of pressure, such as peers, family, and society at large. According to them, students must do well on these exams to have a successful career and a bright future. However, students may experience stress, anxiety, and depression due to the overwhelming competition for these few spots in prestigious universities. In

conclusion, there can be serious psychological effects from the rigorous benchmarks that are set for Indian students, especially regarding the NEET and JEE exams (George, 2023).

Niharika, an 18-year-old JEE aspirant, wrote her parents a suicide note in January of this year, saying, "I can't do JEE. I am a loser". The adolescent continued, saying that suicide was her "last option" Chowdhury (2024). Following the release of the NEET-UG entrance exam results, an 18-year-old candidate from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, committed suicide on a Wednesday evening in Kota, Rajasthan. This year, this was the eleventh suspected case of suicide by a student in Kota. Up to 26 alleged suicide cases by students were documented in the city last year (Gurjar, 2024).

India has a larger percentage of youth and adolescents than it has ever had. UNFPA predicts India's population to be among the

world's youngest until 2030. India is currently experiencing a demographic window of opportunity, or "youth bulge," that is predicted to last until 2025. The challenges India's youth face and must overcome in their development include issues of availability of education, opportunities for employment, persistent gender-based inequality, youth-friendly health services, and pregnancy among adolescents. ("Adolescents and Youth", 2023).

India became the world's most populous country in 2023. According to UN estimates, India now has 142.86 crore people, more than China, making it the most populous nation in the world. According to the UN World Population Dashboard, China is home to 142.57 million people ("India Surpasses China", 2023). Given that India currently has the largest population worldwide with a sizable proportion of youth and adolescents, we can only imagine the "rat race" for admission to the most esteemed universities in the nation. A flexible format akin to the SAT is used in nations like the US and the UK (Vishnoi, 2024). However, since the UK and Canada are ranked 21 and 38 on the world population list, respectively, it is unfair to compare India to these nations. Meanwhile, India comes first (Worldometer, 2024).

China's Gaokao Entrance exam is the equivalent of the Indian National Exams (JEE and NEET) in terms of engineering and medicine if we compare them with those of any other nation. Before 2023, China was the nation with the largest population in the world. It is still ranked second, behind India. China and India have more commonalities as compared to any other nation (Suwan, 2020). Students who are nearing graduation from high school come to a complete stop every year in the first two days of June to take their college entrance exams. Similar to a public holiday, the gaokao, or "higher examination," is a national event that is much less fun. Life opportunities and earning potential are

based on a mark, which can be high or low. That score holds great significance for a Chinese child as it culminates years of education, memorization, and continuous stress. It comes as no surprise that a lot of students feel an unbearable amount of pressure from their parents, teachers, and peers (Ash, 2017).

A student may retake the exam after a year, but there is no safety net or other route to university available if they keep failing. Exam stress is linked to 93% of cases of school students taking their own lives, according to a 2014 study. Suicides are a common occurrence during exam season. (Ash, 2017). The only distinction between all of this and India's JEE and NEET applicants is that China's National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), also known as gao kao, is the entrance exam that all final-year students in the nation must take in order to be admitted to any Chinese university (Bhardwa, 2019).

Since education is highly valued in India, parents typically impose considerable expectations on their children regarding academic performance. This is especially true for the NEET and JEE exams, which are considered the doors leading to some of the most prestigious universities in the country. Success on the NEET and JEE exams is often interpreted by parents and society as indicating a student's intelligence and potential for success in their future careers. Every student experiences a stressful time to perform in the JEE and NEET exams. Parents are under a lot of pressure to ensure that their children perform well on these assessments. To ensure their children's success, parents frequently put their needs and wants on the back burner while investing a significant amount of time and money in their education. Parents may feel compelled to uphold their good reputation in the community because passing the NEET and

JEE exams is often seen as a status symbol (George, 2023).

Due to intense competition and peer pressure, Kota in Rajasthan has become one that strives for excellence but is hampered by stress, melancholy, and hopelessness. There have been a startling twenty-six suicide cases in 2023, five already in 2024, and at least three student disappearances. There were fifteen suicide cases in 2022, eighteen in 2019, twenty in 2018, seven in 2017, seventeen in 2016, and eighteen in 2015. A concerned parent claims that after a spate of student suicides and disappearances, Kota is no longer a safe place to leave your child unaccompanied. Mental health professionals observed that recognizing a child's academic potential and practicing responsible parenting are key to preventing these kinds of situations. A child can only feel safe and secure if they receive customized care and his parents' support. The youth shouldn't think that this is the only career path available to them. In this cutthroat world of peer pressure and often abusive teachers, parents must engage in constant dialogue with their children and be on the lookout for any unusual behavioral changes. Parents should value these qualities in their child rather than making fun of their child's intelligence or academic prowess. Parents must understand that a fine line separates excessive performance pressure and motivational interventions (Roytalukdar, 2024).

Proficient preparation, expert guidance, robust familial and support from friends are crucial for achieving success on these assessments. Besides having the perfect study space, excellent tutoring and coaching from knowledgeable teachers are crucial. Above all, parental involvement is a critical component in ensuring success. Without their unwavering support, passing these challenging exams becomes more difficult. Parental support shields children from

needless stress and gives them the self-assurance to pursue their goals, substantially improving their overall performance and well-being (Kumar, 2024).

In 2024, 12.3 lakh candidates registered for the JEE (Main) January session, exceeding the 68,000 total registrations from the January and April sessions of 2023. According to media sources, as of March 8, 2024, more than 25 lakh students put in their applications for NEET UG 2024, making it the most applications ever received. This shows the competition for these examinations. The pressure to perform well, coupled with societal expectations, personal insecurities, and other factors, has a detrimental effect on their mental health. A lot of students are battling self-doubt, anxiety, and identity crises. Hence, it's no wonder that the highest number of student suicides in 2023 occurred in a city-Kota, in southeast of Rajasthan that has emerged as the main Indian destination for students looking to enroll in coaching programs to prepare for entrance examinations in engineering and medicine. In Kota, at least 26 students committed suicide last year, according to ET Education. It is necessary to establish a welcoming, inclusive campus which provides counseling services and supportive environments where students can openly discuss their struggles and obtain help from peers and teachers (Kumari et al., 2024).

The objective of this study is to explore the association between perceived social support, psychological well-being, and suicidal ideation among JEE and NEET aspirants and understand the effect of Psychological Well-being as a mediator on the relationship between Social Support and Suicidal Ideation.

George (2023), in his book, talks about two of the most prominent and challenging admission tests in India those are the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for Engineering

and National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical. The national entrance exam for dental and medical programs is called NEET, and the national-level admission exam for courses in engineering is JEE. The National Testing Agency (NTA) administers these exams, which are considered vital for getting into some of India's most prestigious universities, such as the National Institutes of Technology (NITs), Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and other prestigious engineering and medical schools. The goal of NEET and JEE was to give all students an equal chance, regardless of where they were from or their background. However, the NEET and JEE tests have become more rigorous over time, with millions of applicants fighting for a few spots in prestigious universities. Many students invest years preparing, which has resulted in solid competitiveness and tension among them because of the pressure to perform well on these Examinations. The intense pressure placed on students to perform well on the NEET and JEE exams can seriously affect their emotional and physical well-being. Peers, family, and society at large are a few causes of the pressure. A significant factor contributing to the intense stress to perform on the NEET and JEE exams is the scarcity of places in esteemed universities. This indicates fierce rivalry for these spots and that applicants must score incredibly high on their examinations to be admitted to these universities. Society's expectations on students also lead to the pressure they feel to get a good score on the NEET and JEE exams. Some students frequently put in extensive study sessions at the expense of their sleep and social existence. Others seek exam preparation assistance by enrolling in coaching programs or hiring private tutors. However, these tactics can also result in tiredness and burnout, worsening students' mental and physical health. Students need guidance and assistance to combat the tension to excel on the NEET and JEE exams. It is crucial to offer

students support and guidance to alleviate the pressure to do well on the NEET and JEE exams. Schools, universities, and coaching centers may all make a big difference in giving pupils the resources and support they need. Families and parents can also play a big part in helping children prepare for the NEET and JEE exams. To guide aspirants to handle stress and anxiety, they can support them emotionally, assist with time management, and motivate them to take breaks and partake in recreational activities (George, 2023).

Gautam, Singh, and Rao (2019) explained that the main effect of perceived ability was significant among JEE and NEET aspirants. Indicating that high perceived ability led to a lower level of depression than the low perceived ability. The results also show that self-motivated girls demonstrated a moderate level of depression while parents-motivated girls had the highest level of depression. On the other hand, boys showed just a reverse trend; self-motivated had moderate levels of depression while parents motivated had the lowest level of depression. The paper also highlights a visible boom in private tuitions all across the country. There is also growing concern over the occurrence of suicides among students in Kota and certain other places where students are forcibly motivated to engage in long hours of studying under pressure. In the past few years, reports of students committing suicide in the city have gone up (Gautam et al., 2019).

According to a Sociological Discourse by Sidana (2023), the development of children's personalities and the provision of high levels of knowledge, creativity, morality, and values that enable them to lead easy and comfortable lives are the primary goals of education. However, it is also true that since education was made into a business, educational institutions have evolved into profit-driven markets, and it is absurd to even

consider welfare in an environment where profit is made. Considering the rising rate of student suicide, it appears that the sole purpose of school these days is to establish oneself as the most significant and most successful person—not to learn new things, develop into a civilized citizen of society, or make a living (Sidana, 2023).

Kota, known as a coaching hub for engineering and medical entrance exams, saw 29 students commit suicide in 2023. Authorities are trying to take immediate action regarding the psychological distress students are facing in the intense academic environment of tuitions (Gurjar, 2024).

Hypotheses:

- H1: There is a significant relationship between Perceived Social Support and Suicidal Ideation among JEE/NEET aspirants
- H2: Psychological well-being has a mediating effect on the relationship between Perceived social support and Suicidal ideation

Method

Participants and Procedure

Altogether, 397 JEE and NEET aspirants were included as participants in the study, of which 230 were male and 167 were female. The mean age of the participants was 16.9 for males and 16.6 for females, ranging from 15 to 19 years.

Measures

Psychological Well-being - The PWB of students is assessed using Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scales. The six essential dimensions of well-being—autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance—are measured on a 42-item scale (Ryff & Keyes,

1995). Respondents were requested to specify their level on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for strongly disagree and 6 stands for strongly agree, with 42 self-descriptive statements. There were twenty reverse-coded items. Higher scores indicate greater PWB. The test-retest reliability value for RPWBS is 0.82.

Perceived Social Support—The Perceived Social Support is assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The MSPSS is a 12-item self-administered questionnaire. Response choices are structured as a 7-point Likert-type scale. This scale was developed by Zimet et al (1988) to determine the extent to which the participant perceives social support from three sources: Significant Others (SO), Family (FA) and Friends (FR). The reliability of the total scale was .85.

Suicidal Ideation – The Suicidal Ideation is measured using the Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS). It is a 5-item scale, with responses measured on a 10- point scale. It assesses the frequency and controllability of suicidal thoughts, distress and impairment related to suicidal thoughts, and closeness to suicide attempt. Total SIDAS scores were assessed by taking the total of the five items, with controllability reverse-scored. Total scale scores on the SIDAS range from 0 to 50, with scores on the higher side indicative of greater suicidal ideation severity. The SIDAS has a high internal consistency. ($\alpha = 0.91$)

Results

The Mediating variable is Psychological well-being, the Predictor variable is Perceived social support, and the Outcome variable is Suicidal ideation. A correlation analysis among all the variables and a mediation analysis with Psychological well-being as a mediator were conducted.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Psychological well-being (PWB) and Suicidal Ideation (SIDAS).

	MSPSS	PWB	SIDAS
MSPSS	-		
PWB	0.520*	-	
SIDAS	-0.232*	-0.420*	-

* $p < .001$

From Table 1, we understand that Perceived social support (MSPSS) has a moderate positive correlation with psychological well-being (PWB) (.520) and has a weak negative correlation with suicidal ideation (SIDAS) (-.232), with p-value less than 0.001. Also, Psychological well-being (PWB) has a moderate negative correlation with suicidal ideation (SIDAS) (-.420), with p-value less than 0.001.

Table 2. Mediation Estimates with Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) as Predictor, Psychological well-being (PWB) as mediator, and Suicidal Ideation (SIDAS) as outcome.

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p
Indirect	-0.16101	0.0254	-6.343	<.001
Direct	0.00439	0.0410	0.107	0.915
Total	-0.15662	0.0369	-4.245	<.001

Table 2 reveals that the indirect effect (through the mediator) is significant and negative. The Z-score is quite large, and the p-value is very small (< .001), indicating that the mediator has a crucial role in transmitting the effect of the predictor on the outcome. Perceived social support indirectly reduces suicidal ideation by positively impacting psychological well-being. The significant negative indirect effect implies that higher perceived social support enhances psychological well-being, which in turn reduces suicidal ideation. The direct effect (not through the mediator) is very small and not statistically significant, with a Z-score

close to zero and a p-value of 0.915. This suggests that the direct effect is negligible once the mediation effect is accounted for. After accounting for the influence of psychological well-being, the direct relationship between perceived social support and suicidal ideation is nearly zero and not significant. This suggests that perceived social support influences suicidal ideation mainly through its influence on psychological well-being. The total effect (combination of both indirect and direct effects) is significant and negative. A large Z-score and a p-value < .001, indicate a significant overall relationship between the predictor and outcome. The overall negative effect of perceived social support on suicidal ideation is significant, indicating that perceived social support plays a vital role in reducing suicidal ideation, primarily by improving psychological well-being.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix among subscales of Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS) and Suicidal Ideation (SIDAS)

	Significant Others	Family	Friends	Suicidal Ideation
Significant Others	-			
Family	0.457*	-		
Friends	0.349*	0.201*	-	
Suicidal Ideation	-0.134	-0.301*	-0.105	-

* $p < .001$

Table 3 reveals that only the "family" subscale of the perceived social support scale has a significant moderate negative correlation with the suicidal ideation of a student. Table 4 shows that all six subscales of the Psychological Well-being scale have a significant negative correlation with suicidal ideation among students.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix among subscales of Psychological Well-being (PWB) scale and Suicidal Ideation (SIDAS).

	Autonomy	Env Mastery	Personal Growth	Positive Relationship	Purpose in life	Self-acceptance	SIDAS
Autonomy	—						
Env Mastery	0.414*	—					
Personal Growth	0.388*	0.341*		—			
Positive Relationship	0.272*	0.334*	0.413*	—			
Purpose in life	0.293*	0.252*	0.444*	0.240*	—		
Self-acceptance	0.404*	0.474*	0.491*	0.462*	0.403*	—	
SIDAS	-0.296*	-0.260*	-0.286*	-0.319*	-0.237*	-0.335*	—

* $p < .001$

Discussion

Our research sought to assess the influence of Perceived social support and psychological well-being on suicidal ideation among JEE/NEET aspirants. Responses were obtained from 397 JEE/NEET aspirants through purposive sampling. Despite being conducted in one metropolitan city (Mumbai) with a diverse population, the insights gained from this study may lay the foundation for further exploration across multiple states in India, allowing for broader generalization over time. By recognizing both the strengths and limitations of our sampling method, we position this study as a critical first step in understanding the mental health challenges faced by entrance exam aspirants. In this study, we have considered “Perceived social support” as the independent variable, “Suicidal Ideation” as the dependent variable, and “Psychological well-being” as the mediating variable. Our alternative hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between Perceived Social Support and Suicidal Ideation. Through the correlation analysis in Table 1, we could say that we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, indicating a significant negative relationship between

Perceived social support and Suicidal Ideation (-0.232 , p -value $< .001$).

This study examines the relationship between perceived social support, psychological well-being, and suicidal ideation among JEE and NEET aspirants, with psychological well-being as a mediating factor. The research highlights the critical role of family support in reducing suicidal ideation, while support from significant others and friends was not found to play a vital role. These findings align with existing studies. For example, Kusumastuti et al. (2021) found that family support markedly influences suicidal ideation, while support from significant others is not a key determinant. Similarly, Miller et al. (2015) emphasized the unique role of parental support in reducing the odds of suicide attempts, echoing the results of the current study. The lack of significant findings regarding support from significant others and friends could be attributed to the specific demographic of the participants, aged 15-19, who are undergoing preparation for competitive entrance exams. Many may not have a “significant other,” and their friends, who are undergoing similar stress, may not be seen as a strong source of support. These shared pressures likely make family

support more impactful, as families provide a consistent and stable form of emotional and practical support during this critical phase.

Table 4 also confirmed a significant negative relationship between psychological well-being and suicidal ideation, with all components of the Psychological Well-being Scale (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) showing a strong association. These results align with Ibrahim et al. (2014), who reported that elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress is linked to heightened suicidal ideation.

The mediation analysis in Table 2 revealed that perceived social support does not have a direct effect on suicidal ideation. Instead, its effect is fully mediated by psychological well-being. This means that perceived social support improves psychological well-being, which subsequently reduces suicidal ideation. This aligns with Emadpoor et al. (2015), who demonstrated that social support positively influences psychological well-being, and with Glozah (2013), who discovered that students with higher perceived social support report greater psychological well-being. Furthermore, Lokanwaththa and Ponnampereuma (2020) confirmed that psychological well-being is a strong predictor of suicidal ideation, with lower well-being associated with higher suicidal ideation.

The findings highlight the critical need for family support, particularly for aspirants preparing for highly competitive exams like JEE and NEET. In many Indian families, parents push students towards traditional career paths, such as becoming a doctor or engineer, often without considering their children's interests. This parental pressure can increase stress, making strong family support critical for improving psychological well-being and reducing suicidal ideation.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, it was conducted exclusively in Mumbai, India, while the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) are national competitive examinations taken by students across the country. Consequently, this geographic limitation may restrict the generalizability of the findings to all aspirants nationwide. Second, all questionnaires were administered in English, which may lead to challenges for some participants from diverse economic backgrounds, some of whom may have limited proficiency in the language, affecting their comprehension of certain items.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is limited research on this topic, which is especially concerning given the rising number of student suicides. Under these tragic circumstances, a focused study on students preparing for JEE and NEET exams is urgently needed. Addressing this issue is crucial to understand and alleviate the pressures these students experience. Additionally, it is high time we acknowledge the need for a change in the education system—one that values all subjects equally and allows students to develop skills they are passionate about, enabling them to pursue careers aligned with their interests. With artificial intelligence increasingly taking over many jobs, instead of pushing our children into the traditional paths of engineering and medicine, we should encourage them to think creatively, innovate, and develop critical thinking skills.

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